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ABSTRACT

In this speech, a black, former principal describes the unique problems facing black school administrators. The author states that his most important task was to establish and maintain credibility in the profession and in the community. He discusses (1) his relations with the staff, (2) his relations with students, (3) his role in school community relations, and (4) his role as an educational leader. He notes that his challenge was to pull the essential elements of the educational program together into something of high quality and at the same time to affirm blackness while not degrading whiteness. (Author/JF)

Dr. Charles R. Thomas
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"UNIQUE PROBLEMS CONFRONTING BLACK SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS"

PERHAPS THIS TOPIC, "UNIQUE PROBLEMS CONFRONTING BLACK SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS," APPEARS TO BE A BIT STRANGE TO MANY. ONE MIGHT RETORT "DON'T ALL SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS GENERALLY FACE MANY OF THE SAME PROBLEMS WITH EDUCATORS, STUDENTS AND WITH THE COMMUNITY? HAVING BEEN A BLACK ADMINISTRATOR I AM NOT ABLE TO COMPARE MY PROBLEMS WITH THOSE OF WHITE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS. IN ONE SENSE THE PROBLEMS CONFRONTING THE BLACK ADMINISTRATORS ARE UNIQUE IN THAT THERE ARE NOT MANY OF THEM AND PEOPLE ARE NOT USED TO SEEING THEM FUNCTION IN POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY. THUS, DUE TO THEIR SCARCENESS MOST PROBLEMS CONFRONTING BLACK SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ARE UNIQUE.

ASIDE FROM BEING THE EDUCATIONAL LEADER OF THE SCHOOL, I FOUND THE ESTABLISHMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF CREDIBILITY WITHIN THE PROFESSION AND COMMUNITY TO BE THE SINGULARLY MOST IMPORTANT TASK WHICH CONFRONTS SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS.

STAFF RELATIONS

THE STAFF WAS WORKING WITH ITS THIRD PRINCIPAL IN AS MANY YEARS. THEIR FIRST QUESTION WAS NOT WHETHER I COULD HANDLE IT BUT RATHER HOW LONG WAS I GOING TO

STAY. THEY SEEMED TO WANT STABILITY AND CONTINUITY. MOST OF THE STAFF WAS YOUNG AND SINCERELY WANTED TO PROVIDE A GOOD EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM. BUT MANY FRANKLY DID NOT HAVE THE TYPE OF SOCIAL AWARENESS AND SENSITIVITY WHICH WOULD ALLOW THEM TO SUCCEED IN THIS SCHOOL-COMMUNITY SETTING.

ALMOST ALL HAD NEVER WORKED UNDER A BLACK PRINCIPAL. THUS THERE WERE MANY QUESTIONS RUNNING THROUGH THEIR MINDS. IS HE A TOKEN OR IS HE REALLY AN EDUCATOR? IS HE A STRONG DISCIPLINARIAN? WILL HE MEAN WHAT HE SAYS? HOW MUCH CAN I GET AWAY WITH? IN DISCIPLINARY MATTERS IS HE GOING TO BELIEVE US OR THE STUDENTS? WHICH GROUP OF PARENTS WILL HE YIELD TO, THE MILITANT BLACKS OR THE IRATE WHITES?

STUDENT RELATIONS

REALIZING THAT THE TOTAL SCHOOL PROGRAM MUST REFLECT THE STUDENTS' NEEDS AND INTERESTS I SET ABOUT ESTABLISHING A MEANINGFUL AND WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH STUDENTS. SOMEHOW STUDENTS HAD TO BE MADE TO REALIZE THAT THE SCHOOL WAS FOR THEM. THE STUDENT COUNCIL WAS BUT ONE FORMAL WAY TO GET AT STUDENT PROBLEMS. THE INFORMAL ONE-TO-ONE CONTACT, THE SMALL UNOFFICIAL GROUP MEETINGS, AND EVEN HOME VISITS PROVED TO BE MOST SUCCESSFUL IN ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY WITH THE STUDENTS.

THE STUDENTS, BOTH BLACK AND WHITE, APPARENTLY ASKED (MENTALLY) MANY OF THE SAME QUESTIONS THE TEACHERS HAD CONCERNING THE NEW BLACK PRINCIPAL. SPECIFICALLY, THE BLACK STUDENTS REALLY WANTED TO KNOW "WHERE I WAS COMING FROM," WAS I LEGITIMATE, AND MORE IMPORTANT, DID I HAVE THEIR BEST INTERESTS AT HEART. THE TASK WAS TO DEMONSTRATE THAT I WAS THERE TO HELP ALL STUDENTS; NOT TO "RIP OFF" BLACK STUDENTS; AND NOT TO ACT PREJUDICIALLY AGAINST WHITE STUDENTS. THIS MEANT MANY HOURS OF EXTRA CURRICULAR STUDENT CONTACT TIME.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

THIS IS THE AREA IN WHICH MANY ADMINISTRATORS FAIL AND THE ARENA FOR WHICH FEW ADMINISTRATORS ARE TRAINED TO DEAL. FEW OF US HAVE BOTHERED TO INTERPRET OUR SCHOOL PROGRAMS TO THE COMMUNITY EXCEPT WHEN THERE IS A REFERENDUM OR A CRISIS. THE OVERT DEMONSTRATION OF AN AWARENESS OF THE TOTAL COMMUNITY AND ITS PROBLEMS PROVED TO BE INVALUABLE IN MY ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY AND DEVELOPING A SCHOOL PROGRAM WHICH REFLECTS THAT COMMUNITY.

ALL PARENTS AND IN PARTICULAR BLACK PARENTS WHO TRADITIONALLY HAD BEEN EXCLUDED EITHER BY DESIGN OR BY THEIR OWN CHOICE FROM THE MAINSTREAM OF THE SYSTEM, HAD TO BE MADE TO UNDERSTAND THAT THEY HAD

FREE ACCESS TO THE SCHOOL. JUST THE NOTION OF BEING ABLE TO VISIT THE SCHOOL UNANNOUNCED MEANT A GREAT DEAL TO ALL PARENTS. THE MERE FACT THAT THE SCHOOL AND ITS PROGRAMS WERE OPEN TO PUBLIC SCRUTINY AND THAT THERE WAS NOTHING EXCLUSIVE AND SECRET ABOUT WHAT THE SCHOOL WAS DOING ARE THINGS WHICH WERE IMPORTANT IN DEVELOPING THAT POSITIVE SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIP.

AS A BLACK IT WAS IMPERATIVE THAT I BE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE WITH THE MOST MILITANT BLACKS AND THE MOST REACTIONARY WHITES. YES, I GOT IT FROM BOTH SIDES, BUT THIS WAS TO BE EXPECTED.

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

WITH THE PROBLEMS OF STAFF AND ADMINISTRATIVE TURNOVER, THE SCHOOL HAD A REPUTATION FOR BEING INNOVATIVE. THE PROBLEM I FACED WAS CONTINUING THIS TRADITION WHILE AT THE SAME TIME INSURING THAT BOTH NEW AND EXISTING PROGRAMS WERE REALLY RELEVANT TO EDUCATION AND REFLECTIVE OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY NEEDS. AS A BLACK ADMINISTRATOR I COULD NOT BE A PARTY TO PERPETUATING AN OLD OUTDATED IN FLEXIBLE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. SUCH A SYSTEM ALL TOO OFTEN HAS MEANT ~~EDUCATIONAL GENOCIDE TO MANY BLACK AND OTHER MINORITY~~

STUDENTS. MY STAFF, CONSEQUENTLY HAD TO GET USED TO THE KIND OF SENSITIVE QUESTIONS WHICH I RAISED REGARDING CURRICULUM CHANGES AND WHAT THOSE PROPOSED CHANGES WOULD DO OR WOULD NOT DO FOR BLACK AND OTHER MINORITY STUDENTS.

AS A RESULT, ONE OF THE PRACTICES WHICH WAS ELIMINATED WAS ABILITY GROUPING. INSTEAD WE USED A KIND OF INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION WHICH PROVED MOST PROFITABLE FOR BOTH STUDENTS AND TEACHERS. IT PROVIDED A GREATER VARIETY OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS AND AT THE SAME TIME FORCED TEACHERS TO EXPLORE NEW METHODOLOGIES IN MEETING THE VARIOUS NEEDS OF YOUNGSTERS.

IN EFFECTIVELY DEALING WITH ALL FOUR OF THESE AREAS I WAS ABLE TO ESTABLISH A FUNCTIONALLY ACCEPTABLE LEVEL OF CREDIBILITY. BUT CREDIBILITY IS LIKE RELIGION, ONE SELDOM ACHIEVES 100 PERCENT, BUT RATHER ONE CONTINUES TO WORK TO IMPROVE THE SITUATION. THUS, SUMMARILY SPEAKING, THE PROBLEM WAS TO PULL THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM TOGETHER INTO SOMETHING OF HIGH QUALITY AND AT THE SAME TIME TO AFFIRM BLACKNESS WHILE NOT DEGRADING WHITENESS. IT WAS A PROBLEM OF CONVINCING ALL STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS, THAT YOU, AS A BLACK SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR, ARE CAPABLE AND THAT YOU HAVE THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN AS YOUR PRIME GOAL.

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